

# On Assignment in Washington, DC

**T**HE hours are long, the weather can be harsh, and the commute may be lengthy. But the work is rewarding, the environment is dynamic, and the experience is one-of-a-kind. Welcome to being on assignment in Washington, DC.

Since the early 1990s, hundreds of Livermore scientists have accepted off-site assignments in Washington, DC, providing technical high-level support to federal agencies. Approximately 30 assignees are in Washington at any given time, serving in advisory roles at the Department of Energy (DOE), the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in the intelligence community, in the White House, or on Capitol Hill. “Laboratory managers across the directorates and programs recognize Washington assignments as valuable to our institutional strategy as well as to the career growth of assignees,” says T. R. Koncher, head of the Laboratory’s off-site personnel program. Koncher, who is also deputy principal associate director for strategy and policy in the Global Security Principal Directorate and director of Livermore’s National Security Office, notes, “Assignments are not entry-level. Employees in their mid to late careers are needed for technically focused positions, and senior-level personnel are needed to lead organizations.”

Program participants say the world looks different from Washington. “One sees the bigger national security picture,” says Susan Hurd, a Laboratory employee currently on assignment at DoD. In addition, assignees learn about the workings of federal agencies and congressional committees, building programs, developing budgets, and communicating with Congress. Many assignees describe the environment as “intense” but consider the experience rewarding and beneficial to themselves, the sponsor, and the Laboratory.

## From the Hill to the Pentagon

In most cases, off-site positions arise in response to a request from a federal agency. An individual is then selected for his or her related knowledge and experience. Assignments are generally processed as a change-of-station, a Laboratory policy that enables employees to move their residence and work location with minimal personal financial impact.



Many program participants are sent to Washington through Intergovernmental Personnel Agreements, which authorize Laboratory personnel to act as federal employees. Other assignees serve in advisory roles, without federal employee responsibilities or authorities. In either capacity, individuals are on assignment to fully support the agency.

Larry Ferderber, Livermore engineer and chief of staff for the Laboratory Director, is one of the few Laboratory employees who has worked in Congress. In 1993, Ferderber was selected to be an advisor to Nevada Senator and current Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. As a result of the nuclear testing moratorium issued by President George H. W. Bush in 1992, the future of the Nevada Test Site was uncertain. Ferderber, then deputy associate director of nuclear test and experimental science, had the expertise to advise the senator on test site and other DOE-related issues.

According to Ferderber, “Working as a congressional advisor provides a unique perspective on what it is like to be an elected official and allows one to see the difference between technical and political decision making. One gains a much greater appreciation for what happens in Congress.”

Nancy Suski, deputy program director for domestic security in the Global Security Principal Directorate and two-time Washington

assignee, agrees, “In Washington, I developed a huge appreciation for the sponsor, what they have to deal with, and how responsive they must be to the political climate.” Suski’s first Washington assignment changed her career path. In 1992, she left her position as a project engineer at Livermore to establish and then run the Laboratory’s Washington-based uranium enrichment program office. “There was a lot of turmoil in DC at the time,” says Suski. “The White House was going through an administration change, and the Soviet Union had fallen the year before.” In addition, the United States Enrichment Corporation had recently been established with the goal of privatizing the government’s uranium enrichment operation for nuclear power plants. Suski’s experience working with Livermore’s Atomic Vapor Laser Isotope Separation—a uranium enrichment process that uses lasers—made her a perfect fit for the assignment. Four years later, she returned to the Laboratory as a program leader.

In January 2003, Suski again took a Washington assignment, this time through an Intergovernmental Personnel Agreement to help establish DHS. She was assigned to DHS’s Science and Technology Directorate as director of the portfolio for Emergency Preparedness and Response. Her responsibilities included assessing the needs and capabilities of first responders and developing ways to improve their emergency-response capabilities. This experience was very different from her first Washington assignment. During Suski’s second term, she worked in a federal capacity, justifying budgets, speaking to Congress about the portfolio, and dealing with controversies in the decision-making process. “Acting as a federal employee, I had to decide what is best for the federal government to support,” says Suski.

Suski is one of several Livermore employees who have worked in DHS. Mike Carter, deputy principal associate director for programs in the Global Security Principal Directorate, went to Washington in

2002 as a technical advisor for the White House Transition Planning Office to help establish DHS. He subsequently moved to DHS’s Science and Technology Directorate in March 2003.

In 2005, Carter was designated the deputy director of DHS’s Domestic Nuclear Detection Office, an interagency office that incorporates staff from DOE, DoD, Department of State, the National Regulatory Commission, and other DHS groups. In this assignment, he was routinely involved in the high-level interactions of DHS and the Office of Management and Budget. Carter recalls the time when he was asked to give a half-hour briefing about the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office to the new Secretary of Homeland Defense, Michael Chertoff. During the briefing, Secretary Chertoff unexpectedly asked Carter to give him a tutorial on the physics of nuclear detection.

Carter believes that spending time in Washington is essential training for future leaders of the Laboratory. “Building programs, developing budgets, and learning how priorities are set in DC made me more effective back at Livermore,” he says.

Laboratory assignees also help strengthen communication between national laboratories and Washington officials. Hurd believes one of her most important tasks is to help effectively present programs of Lawrence Livermore and other laboratories. Hurd has had the opportunity to take three assignments in Washington. She initially served as a scientific advisor in DoD’s Office of Nuclear Matters and was later recruited by the National Nuclear Security Administration, where she helped develop the strategy for transforming the nuclear weapons enterprise. For her third assignment, she returned to DoD, where she currently works for the Office of Strategic Warfare. “The work is hugely rewarding,” says Hurd. “Washington assignments provide a unique opportunity to serve the Laboratory, a federal organization, and the nation, all at the same time.”



(From left) Larry Ferderber, Mike Carter, T. R. Koncher, Nancy Suski, and Susan Hurd (not shown) are among the hundreds of Laboratory employees who have had assignments in Washington, DC, since the early 1990s.



In an effort to stay connected to Washington assignees, one or two Livermore managers, typically associate directors or principal associate directors, travel to Washington each quarter. “It’s part of good management to keep track of how the assignees are doing,” says Ferderber. In addition, some assignees periodically return to Livermore to take part in the Laboratory’s seminar, “The View from Washington,” where they describe their assignments and interact with colleagues.

### Everybody Wins

“Off-site personnel assignments are an all-around good idea,” says Ferderber. “Each individual brings the skills, knowledge, and abilities to fulfill a particular sponsor’s needs. At the same time, the assignments afford personnel an opportunity to learn how government works, how decisions are made, and how information must be presented to be effective.” In addition, when assignees return to the Laboratory, they are valuable assets to programs because of their insight into the workings of federal agencies and congressional committees. “Personnel who have been on assignment in Washington have seen how government works and know how the Laboratory can better relate to the customer,” says Ferderber.

Off-site assignments do involve some sacrifice. Carter says, “The hardest part about working in Washington is juggling the family and the job.” Relocating across the country can be difficult for one person, but it is even more complicated when moving a family, especially when the family includes school-age children. The combination of family circumstances and the mental and physical demands of the job can make working in Washington a challenge.

Despite these personal obstacles, participants believe the experience is highly beneficial. “When the Laboratory has the right people, doing the right job, at the right time in Washington, it can develop solid programs that withstand the test of time and benefit the sponsor,” says Carter. In addition, employees who spend part of their careers in Washington often return to the Laboratory in higher-level positions.

As a telling example, in 1989, Livermore’s current Director, George Miller, was asked to go to Washington by DOE to work for Secretary of Energy Admiral James Watkins and with senior members of DOE’s defense programs. Miller says, “It was a rewarding experience in terms of making personal connections and being more closely exposed to the issues that affect the Laboratory. I strongly support having employees take a Washington assignment. These assignments are valuable to an individual’s career development and to the Laboratory.”

Overall, participants in the off-site personnel program understand the importance of what they do and how it benefits the nation. As Koncher says, “Having people in DC is important to the future of the Laboratory. Success of the program is really all about the people.”

—Caryn Meissner

**Key Words:** change-of-station; Intergovernmental Personnel Agreement; off-site assignment; Washington, DC.

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